



## National Catholic Prayer Breakfast

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### HOPE AND ITS DAUGHTERS

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I grew up in Concordia, Kansas. It's a typical small farming community of less than 7,000 people. But in those days Concordia was also the hometown of Senator Frank Carlson, who was a major player in Congress. So it wasn't unusual for people in Concordia to think they had something important to say about government affairs and life in Washington, DC.

That's the way it should be. That's what the Founders of our country intended. All of us, no matter how little we are, have a voice in our nation's public life and a major part to play.

Additionally, Catholics see politics as part of the history of salvation. For us, no one is a minor actor in that drama. Each person is important. And one of the most important duties we have is to use our gifts in every way possible for the glory of God and for the common good. That's why Catholics and other Christians have *always* taken an active role in public life. What we believe about God shapes how we think about men and women. It also shapes what we do about promoting human dignity.

Today's national discussion about religion and politics is sometimes so very strange. If God is the center of our lives, then *of course* that fact will influence our behavior, including our political decisions. That's natural and healthy. What's unnatural and unhealthy is the kind of public square where religious faith is seen as unwelcome and dangerous. But that seems to be exactly what some people want: a public square stripped of God and stripped of religious faith.

Our duty, if we're serious about being Catholics, is to not let that happen. But our work as citizens doesn't end there. Our bigger task is to help renew American public life by committing ourselves ever more deeply to our Catholic faith -- and acting like we really mean it.

Catholics spent the first 200 years of our nation's life trying to fit in and be accepted. Well, congratulations, we did it. We made it. We've arrived. But we should remember St. Paul's words: "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (2 Cor 10:17).

Have we *really examined* the cost of our fitting in? Since the 1960s, many American Catholics have been acting like we're lucky just to be tolerated in the public square. In other words, we'd better not be *too* Catholic or somebody will be offended. That's a mistake. It's a recipe for losing our faith and throwing away any hope for a national political discourse based on conviction. It's also important to notice that most of today's anti-Catholic prejudice in the public square is different from the past. It doesn't come from other religious believers. It comes from people who don't want any religious influence in public debates.

That's not pluralism. It's not democracy. Democracy and pluralism depend on people of conviction fighting for what they believe through public debate - peacefully, legally, charitably and justly; but also vigorously and without excuses. Divorcing our personal convictions from our public choices and actions is not "good manners." On the contrary, it can be a very serious kind of theft from the moral treasury of the nation, because the most precious thing anyone can bring to *any* political conversation is an honest witness to what he or she really believes.

This applies to elected officials. It applies to voters. It applies to you and me. Belief in God has profoundly shaped what Americans believe about human dignity; the law; the common good; and justice. To cut God out of the public square is to cut the head and heart from our public life.

What we really believe, we conform our lives to. And if we *don't* conform our lives to what we claim to believe, then we're living a lie. When public officials claim to be "Catholic" but then say they can't offer their beliefs about the sanctity of the human person as the basis of law, it always means one of two things. They're either very confused, or they're very evasive. All law is the imposition of somebody's beliefs on somebody else. That's exactly the reason we have debates, and elections, and Congress - to turn the struggle of ideas and moral convictions into laws that guide our common life.

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, which is the birthday of the Church. In Catholic churches around the world, lectors read the following passage from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' *except by the Holy Spirit.*"

Now, that may sound like the right way to read it, but it's wrong. That passage should really be read this way: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord!' *except by the Holy Spirit.*" It's the fire of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that enables us to make this profession of faith; that gives us the kind of energy and zeal to live our lives based on our faith in Jesus Christ.

We need to understand that in the early Church, those words - "Jesus is Lord" - were a political statement. The *emperor* claimed to be Lord both in the private and public lives of the citizens of the empire. When Christians proclaimed Jesus as Lord, they were proclaiming the centrality of Jesus not only in their personal lives, but in their public lives and their decision-making as well. That took real courage. And it had huge consequences for their lives. Jesus was hung upon the cross because of his claim of Lordship. Christianity was illegal for the first 250 years of the Church's life because Christians proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord."

Americans re-elected President Bush because most voters saw him, and see him, as a man of dedication and a leader deserving of our respect -- but he is not "Lord." Our political parties - whether Democratic or Republican -- are not "Lord." Congress is not "Lord." The Supreme Court is not "Lord." And neither are we "Lord"; nor our spouse or friends or possessions or talents. None of these people or things is Lord. Only God is God, and only Jesus Christ is Lord. And Christ's relationship with each of us as individuals, and all of us as the believing Catholic community, should be the driving force of our personal lives and for all of our public witness - including our political witness.

"God" need not be on our lips every minute of every day. But He should be in our hearts from the moment we wake, to the moment we sleep. Only Jesus is Lord. The Church belongs to Him; not to us, but to *Him*. And there's no way -- *no way* -- that we should ever allow ourselves to be driven from the public square by those who want someone else, or something else, to be Lord.

St Augustine, who had such a deep influence on the mind of our new Holy Father, once wrote that, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not *remain* the way they are." Are we angry enough about what's wrong with the world -- the killing of millions of unborn children through abortion; the neglect of the poor and the elderly; the mistreatment of immigrants in our midst; the abuse of science in embryonic stem cell research? Do we really have the courage of our convictions to change those things?

The opposite of hope is cynicism, and cynicism also has two daughters. Their names are indifference and cowardice. In renewing ourselves in our faith, what Catholics need to change most urgently is the habit and rhetoric of cowardice we find in our own personal lives, in our national political life, and sometimes even within the Church herself.

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost. This coming Sunday we celebrate the feast of the Holy Trinity. Every year during this week between Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, I reflect on what the Church means when she talks about the season of "ordinary time." There's a spot just west of Denver as you descend out of the Rocky Mountains where the mountains suddenly stop, and the horizon opens up, and you gaze out on the beginning of the Great Plains - a thousand miles of flatland between Denver and the Mississippi River.

It reminds me of where we spend most of our lives. Not in the mountains, but on the plains - raising families, doing our jobs, making the daily choices that shape the world around us. Ordinary time is the space God gives to each of us to make a difference -- between the past and the future, between Pentecost and Jesus' Second Coming.

What we do with that ordinary time - in our personal choices and in our public actions -- matters eternally. Solzhenitsyn once said that "the line separating good and evil runs not through states, nor between classes, nor even between political parties, but right through the center of each human heart, and every human heart."

Renewing our hearts -- that's where we begin. Renewing the world - that's our goal. Reclaiming the fire and courage of Pentecost - that's how we'll get there. Say it, and mean it, and live it: *Only God is God, and only Jesus is Lord.* When our actions finally follow our words, then so will our nation, and so will the world.

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